

## **Research reveals approaches to retain volunteers**

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Most nonprofit organizations rely on volunteers to help provide services and could not function without this source of support to conduct programs, raise funds or serve clients.

In 2013, 25.4 percent of adults in the United States volunteered with an organization contributing a little over 8 billion hours. However, nonprofits are confronted with two main challenges with a volunteer workforce.

First, nonprofit organizations are increasingly confronted with pressures to become more competitive. As volunteers are important to organizational performance, nonprofit managers are faced with increasing demands to account for the value of volunteer contributions, thus, requiring them to adapt their practices.

Second, the nature of volunteering is changing. Volunteers' motivations and expectations have become more individualistic and ad-hoc and are less driven by long-term commitments.

Moreover, contemporary volunteers increasingly expect their motivations and expectations to be met and are willing to leave the organizations if they do not perceive a good fit due to a mismatch between volunteer motives and volunteer tasks.

Thus, knowledge about how to attract, and most importantly, how to retain volunteers is even more important for nonprofit leaders.

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Given these two challenges, researchers have proposed two main approaches to facilitate volunteer retention through a match of volunteer motives to volunteer tasks.

One approach — the functional perspective — argues that individuals with different reasons to volunteer might be willing to take on same types of tasks. The other approach — the diversified perspective — argues that only particular motives relate to individuals' willingness to take on particular tasks as such that different tasks satisfy different volunteer motives.

For example, the functional perspective implies that volunteers are driven by motives such as altruistic values, professional career opportunities, and possibilities to spend time with friends and would be equally satisfied when given the task to lead a meeting, reorganize the filing cabinet, help others or organize a fundraising event. The diversified perspective on the other hand posits that individuals with a particular motive such as enhancing career opportunities will be satisfied when given a particular task such as leading a meeting, but less satisfied when given other tasks such as reorganizing the filing cabinet.

In an article that I co-authored (Willems & Walk, 2013), we shared our research that found that neither approach is sufficient and provided evidence for the importance of a combination of the functional and the diversified perspective.

In a research sample of youth volunteers, my co-author and I learned that most volunteers are satisfied if provided with the possibility to fulfill a broad and basic set of tasks. However, additionally, we identify four, more diversified, relationships between motives and tasks.

- For those individuals with high expectations to express their personal altruistic values through volunteering, tasks related to administration, leadership, facility maintenance and fundraising were especially salient.
- If volunteers aim to create or enhance professional career opportunities and are less motivated by the opportunity to be with friends, leadership tasks are most likely to fulfill their expectations.
- Individuals who are not motivated by the creation of professional career opportunities are most satisfied when provided with administrative and facility maintenance tasks.
- Finally, individuals who volunteer as a means to compensate for negative feelings or address personal problems are most satisfied if provided with tasks that can be done individually.

Ultimately, my co-author and I propose that effective volunteer management strategies could consist of a generalist base that guarantees the execution of a basic and broad set of volunteer tasks. However, in addition to that, nonprofit managers might want to pay attention to the motivational differences among specific groups of volunteers in order to be able to better match extreme variations of individual motives to volunteer tasks.

## Reference

Willems, J., & Walk, M. (2013). Assigning volunteer tasks: The relation between task preferences and functional motives of youth volunteers. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 35(6), 1030–1040.

<http://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.03.010>